A Visual Journey through Time

What Is the Role of Visual Culture?
CHERYL FINLEY, HISTORY OF ART

Cultural Memory of an Icon
I am completing a book called Committed to Memory: The Slave Ship Icon in the Black Atlantic Imagination. It is a cultural study of the most recognized image associated with the memory of slavery and the Middle Passage: a black-and-white schematic print named "Description of a Slave Ship," which shows the manner in which African captives were stowed on slave ships. I write about why I can describe the image to just about anyone, and they know it precisely. I explore the historical uses, interpretations, and adaptations of the image through time, beginning with the significance of why British abolitionists created it in England in 1789.

"Description of a Slave Ship" revealed, for the first time, the system of transporting enslaved Africans from the west coast of Africa to the New World. It exposed the horror and inhumanity beneath the decks of slave ships, which was not visible from the shores of England. Tradespeople, from blacksmiths to textile manufacturers, facilitated the slave trade with their wares, but they were uninformed about the nastiness of the business. This image graphically illustrated how enslaved Africans were tightly packed as human cargo on slave ships, and the accompanying text, with mathematical calculations describing the cramped space per man, woman, or child, as well as documented incidents of sickening torture, urged members of Parliament and ordinary citizens to join the campaign to end the slave trade.

Using naval architectural precision, the slave ship schematic exposed the cruel business of the transatlantic slave trade to people who had the ability to change the law in Britain. These were members of Parliament and others, including the Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade, which eventually would rally enough people to organize a broad-based effort to end the slave trade. Known as the abolitionist movement, this was the first modern political campaign to utilize grassroots organizational tactics, including the dissemination of shocking visual images like "Description of a Slave Ship" drawn with small black figures representing African captives.

The image was designed originally to critique the Slave Trade Regulation Act of 1788, which called for a slave ship doctor on board to treat illness and prevent loss of life, as well as a reduction in the number of captives a slave ship was legally allowed to carry in order to ease crowding and create a safer transatlantic voyage. But with "Description of a Slave Ship," the abolitionists made the visual argument that even regulation was an abomination: the slave trade must be abolished altogether. And by 1807 it
was ended in Great Britain and the following year in the United States. More than 200,000 impressions of the print had been reproduced and disseminated by the end of the 18th century, in what Robert Farris Thompson (and later, Paul Gilroy) called the Black Atlantic—the modern political and geographical space that connects black people around the Atlantic Rim through historical and cultural exchange.

Yet the illegal slave trade persisted, and countries like Spain and Portugal continued the business well into the mid-19th century. What is more, slavery as an institution remained legal in most of the New World. In the United States, the image became an icon for ending slavery beyond 1807. It was reproduced in many different visual and material forms, including broadsides, children’s books, and embroidery. Even after slavery was abolished, it continued to hold an attraction for visual artists with its repeating black figures symbolizing the creation of an African diaspora. In the 20th century, artists started to adapt the slave ship icon for new uses, beginning in 1928 with a Mexican graphic artist named Miguel Covarrubias, who was also a caricaturist and a muralist. He illustrated a book called *Adventures of an African Slaver* about an infamous slave ship captain from 1860, Theodore Canot, using the icon in a series of drawings.

By the mid-1960s, during the height of the Black Arts movement in the United States, visual and performing artists began to appropriate and rework the image. Eugene Lee’s set design for Amiri Baraka’s play, *Slave Ship* (1967), was based on the slave ship schematic with actors and audience members physically embodying the figures of the enslaved. This is central to my project, because I am interested in not only the immediate recognition of the image, but also why visual artists working in the 1960s—as well as in 2009—still find the image urgent and relevant when talking about a connectedness of African Americans, Africans, and African diaspora people and about the African diaspora and African American identity. The book is under contract with Princeton University Press and will be published in the coming year.

### Autobiography and Memory

Afro-Caribbean art history is another area of my research and teaching, stemming from my lifelong study of Spanish language and culture as well as my interest in black Atlantic cultural exchange. I have completed an extensive oral history interview with the contemporary Afro-Cuban artist Maria Magdalena Campos-Pons, which forms the basis of a monograph I have been asked to write about her. It is part of a new series called *A Ver: Revisioning Art History* (*a ver* means “to see” in Spanish), which documents the lives of contemporary Latino artists through oral histories that will be deposited at the UCLA oral history archive, and monographs will be published by the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center and the University of Minnesota Press. Campos-Pons, who lives and works in Boston, is a photographer and installation artist who also uses sound and video to recall the memories and images of her childhood and extended family in Matanzas, Cuba. Her work reflects my own interest in autobiography and memory.

### Ghana and U.S. Civil Rights

In 2007 I was the recipient of an Alphonse Fletcher Sr. Fellowship, awarded for projects that further the legacy of the landmark *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* U.S. Supreme Court decision of 1954. Called the “Guggenheims for race issues,” by Henry Louis Gates Jr., who chairs the selection committee, the Fletcher Fellowship was instituted by Alphonse Fletcher Jr. of Fletcher Asset Management in 2004.

My project explores the relationship between the Ghanaian National Liberation Movement and the U.S. Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s in an exhibition and book project entitled *Picturing Black Power*. The project—with a focus mostly on film and photography—looks at the relationship between Kwame Nkrumah, the first prime minister and later president of Ghana, and Civil Rights leaders in the United States, including people like Martin Luther King Jr., W. E. B. Du Bois, and others who visited Ghana and knew Nkrumah.

### Collaborative Work

I thrive on collaborative teaching, research, and learning. Besides occasional guest lectures in my colleagues’ seminars, I take my classes to the Johnson Museum for guided, behind-the-scenes tours of collections by the museum staff. I joined colleagues Brett de Bary and Salah Hassan in organizing the conference Strange Fruit: Lynching, Visuality, and Empire in 2006. I have also collaborated with colleagues at Cornell on projects that have taken root elsewhere, including the exhibition of contemporary art and performance by David Hammons, Maria Magdalena Campos-Pons, and Pamela Z, 3x3: *Three Artists, Three Projects*, co-curated with Salah Hassan for the 2004 Dakar Biennial of Contemporary African Art.

### Teaching Art History

I teach a survey course on African American art from 1619 to the present; another survey course on African American cinema; Black International Visual and Literary Cultures, a graduate seminar that looks at key texts by important theorists, artists, and performers such as C. L. R. James, Katherine Dunham, Manthia Diawara, and Eslanda Robeson; Exhibiting Cultures, a museum studies seminar that is one of my most popular graduate seminars; and a seminar on the Black Arts movement that I taught as a distance learning course this past summer. I am developing a seminar that explores the history of the art market, which I am teaching for the first time in fall 2009. I am also developing a course called Reading Art History, a seminar that examines literature focused on certain aspects of visual art, such as a painting, an artist, an art school, or an art scandal. Another popular course is a seminar called Contemporary African Diaspora Art.
My courses are cross-listed with Africana studies and American studies, and often the Department of Theatre, Film, and Dance or gender studies. The Department of History of Art and Visual Studies offers students a way to understand the unfolding of time—the unfolding of history—through the study of objects of art and the diverse cultures and stylistic contexts in which they were made.

Exhibiting Cultures

One of my favorite courses to teach is Exhibiting Cultures: Museums, Exhibitions, Representation, and Display. This undergraduate/graduate seminar investigates the history of exhibitions, with an emphasis on African, African diaspora, and African American art. We look at the history of how people from Africa were actually put on exhibit in makeshift villages at world’s fairs, such as the 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago or the 1931 Paris Exposition Coloniale. We also study the contemporary practices of installation, performance, and video art.

A recent focus has been on contemporary African artists and art collectives working in urban settings, some of whom utilize the blank spaces of walls in blighted neighborhoods for murals, like the Set Setal group in Dakar, Senegal. Others make sculptures out of found detritus in cities like Lagos, Nigeria. One such example is Ghanaian-born sculptor El Anatsui, who is known for huge kente cloth–like tapestries that he makes out of found scraps of liquor bottle labels, bottle caps, and other things he has pieced together, commenting on the continuing effects of colonialism on contemporary Africa.

Upper-level undergraduates and graduate students from history of art, art, architecture and planning, visual studies, American studies, and Africana studies typically take the course. Most share an interest in museum studies and want to know more about the history of exhibitions and how curatorial practices have shaped the ways in which we see African diaspora people. The course allows students lots of creativity and leeway in designing their final projects. One MFA student in painting wrote a paper that compared the short-lived careers of American president John F. Kennedy and Democratic Republic of Congo president Patrice Lumumba. As part of her project, she painted photo-realistic portraits of each president from historic photographs. Another student, who had studied in South Africa, wrote a final paper on the popular contemporary practice of “township tourism,” where visitors take tours of economically depressed townships.

In addition to visiting the Johnson Museum and other special collections on campus, such as the Samuel J. May Anti-Slavery Collection and the Cornell Hip Hop Collection at the Kroch Library, we often take a trip to New York City. In New York, we go to places like the Metropolitan Museum, the Studio Museum in Harlem, and commercial galleries such as the Jack Shainman Gallery, which shows the work of contemporary African American and African artists. On many occasions, I’ve arranged for the class to sit down and have a conversation with Monique Crine, MFA thesis project, “Painting in Burlwood”
Jack Shainman, owner of the gallery, who often talks about what is currently on exhibition and what is in the back room. And if we’re lucky, we are treated to wonderful little gems of contemporary art that he recently acquired and has not yet put on display. Often we will run into famous artists like Emma Amos, who was at the Studio Museum when we were there, or Fred Wilson, who was at his gallery, Pace Wildenstein, on the last day of his show and took the time to give us an impromptu lecture about the exhibition.

The Black Arts Movement
Since fall 2007, I have also enjoyed teaching a seminar on the Black Arts movement, a new area of research for many scholars of African American art. In the seminar, we focus on the period from 1965 to 1976, a significant time in art history when African American visual and performing artists, as well as writers and poets, people like Amiri Baraka, were inspired by the work of Civil Rights leaders and came together as the visual and literary arm of the Black Power Movement. They created murals, a populist kind of visual art that honors slain leaders like Martin Luther King and Malcolm X and historical leaders like W. E. B. Du Bois, as well as spoken word poetry, the predecessor of modern hip hop. Among other things, the movement argued for a place in the mainstream art world for black visual artists, writers, curators, and museum professionals within New York City and in cities around the United States.

Creating a Career in Art History
I have always had an interest in the arts, particularly photography. When I was in high school, my father gave me a camera, and I took a course in photography at Howard University, a historically black university and my parents’ alma mater. When I went to Wellesley College as an undergraduate, I was a Spanish major with a work-study position in the art department. My job there was to show slides to art history classes. At the time, art historians taught their classes with analog slides (35mm and lantern) as opposed to digital images, which are common today. I also prepared new slides for use by art history professors in the department, which enabled me to see, up close, a virtual catalog of images documenting the history of art! Over the four years as a slide projectionist, I had the opportunity to audit nearly every course that was offered by the art department. It was a fascinating introduction that whet my appetite for the discipline of art history.

Upon graduating, I landed a job as a curator for an art collector who had purchased the archive of Berenice Abbott, a famous American photographer known for her architectural study of New York City from 1935 to 1938 called Changing New York. As curator of the collection, I mounted more than 25 exhibitions during my three-year tenure. I also put together small collections of photographs from the archive that were donated every year to museums and institutions as a tax benefit for the owner. These mini-collections of about ten prints each provided an overview of Abbott’s oeuvre and were given mostly to college and university museums. As part of the process of annual giving, I got to know and observe the appraiser for the collection, who assessed the value of each donation for the purposes of determining the tax benefit. When she needed an assistant, I seized the opportunity to train with her. Over the next several years, I learned the art appraisal business specializing in photography.

Although I had always wanted to be a photographer, I had to be realistic. My mother is a computer science professor, and my father was a dentist. I came from an African American family that strongly advocated the traditional professions. To this day, I can still hear an elder saying to me, “You go to college; you graduate; and you become a doctor, lawyer, or someone like that.” So the idea of being an artist-photographer was a foreign concept, even to me. I often wondered, “How would I make it work financially?” But there I was, doing appraisal work, which was wonderful, exciting, and glamorous at the same time! I had the rare opportunity to examine some of the most important and valuable photographic collections, and I often met the artists and collectors behind them. This line of work, while not one of the traditional professions considered by my family, nevertheless combined for me the best of both worlds: art and finance.

Fascinating!
- A black-and-white schematic print of the hold of a slave ship: I write about why I can describe the image to people, and they know it precisely.
- It was the leading piece of visual culture disseminated by British abolitionists to end the slave trade by 1807.
- A project on film and photography looks at the relationship between Kwame Nkrumah, the first prime minister and later president of Ghana, and Civil Rights leaders in the United States.
- History of art offers us a way to understand the unfolding of time—the unfolding of history—through the study of visual images in diverse cultures and stylistic contexts.
- I wanted to be able to cultivate a new group of collectors—not just materialistic collectors who buy for the sake of status, but people who are interested in preserving the visual art of the African American culture.
I started my own appraisal and art consulting business in New York and ran it for three years. As part of my work, I monitored auctions at houses like Christie’s and Sotheby’s by regularly attending the fall and spring sales. Appraisers need to know how the market moves, where the market moves, what sells, who buys it, where it is placed, at what institution, and in what collection. Although I knew I had the option of joining the staff of either of these auction houses as a specialist in the photographs department, something was not right, but I could not yet put my finger on it.

My decision to go to graduate school was spurred by two events, although my mother was always in the background saying, “Go to graduate school, honey, and get your PhD, please.” A friend studying at UCLA explained that I could apply to a major research institution to study for my doctorate and likely be eligible for a tuition reimbursement and a stipend, which would make it affordable. I thought about it: I could actually afford to study what I want to study!

The other event that pushed me into action took place when I was observing an auction at Christie’s shortly after the death of Robert Mapplethorpe, an American photographer known for his stark, modernist images of flowers and nudes, particularly male nudes. Among his works offered in the sale was *Man in a Polyester Suit* (1980), a provocative nude of a black man. At the time, auction houses did not have digital projection of the works for sale. Instead, employees—who were usually black or Latino men dressed in blue-collar uniforms—had the job of holding up each work of art before the primarily white audience as the auctioneer opened the bidding. When *Man in a Polyester Suit* came up for sale, a very humble, uniformed black man held it up for display, but the work was pointing in the wrong direction. The entire audience erupted in laughter. My thought was that this should not be happening. This man should be able to be the auctioneer, not the man holding the picture, and this audience should be diverse. At that moment I knew I could not do this job any more.

I wanted the auction room to have more people of color with the knowledge, ability, desire, and money to be collectors of art. I wanted to have the knowledge to educate others about African American art and photography. That was what I wanted to do. And that is precisely what I did! This is why I chose a PhD program in art history and African American studies. I needed both fields to cultivate a new group of collectors who were interested in learning about and preserving the visual art of African Americans and Africans throughout the diaspora.

I went on to earn my PhD from Yale in art history and African American studies. At the time it was the only joint PhD program of its type in the country. The program gave me the cultural analysis, historical accuracy, and political theory that comes from the field of African American studies, combined with the rigorous visual analysis and material culture theory that are the hallmarks of art history.

**Art History on the Road**

I would love to teach a practicum on contemporary African diaspora art that would enable students to go to some of the places where artists are living and working and complete a project over the period of a semester or during the January term. The course would be based in Ithaca, but it would allow us to travel to places like Salvador da Bahia, Brazil; Havana, Cuba; or Dakar, Senegal to curate an exhibition, document an artist’s work, or experience a biennial of contemporary art. Opportunities such as these to collaborate with colleagues abroad make it exciting to be a member of the faculty here.

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Favorite Spots on Campus
The fifth floor of the Johnson Museum is one of my favorite spots. I love the view of West Hill and Cayuga Lake from there. I often find myself sitting in one of the comfortable sofas grading papers or reading. My daughter also likes to practice walking there. The Africana Studies and Research Center library is another great spot. It is a treasure trove, and the library staff, Eric Acree and Sharon Powers, make it a joy and honor to work in there.

What I Love about Ithaca
A Winter’s Night. I love driving across the Stewart Avenue bridge in the dead of winter on a moonlit night, stopping and turning my head to look back at the gorge and seeing the frozen formations of glowing ice. Ithaca’s colors are gorgeous—from the bold oranges, reds, and browns of autumn to the starkness of white and gray in the winter, to the fresh green blades of grass and springtime buds on trees.

From Buffalo Street to Bailey Hall. I love the sweet, amorous perfume of the linden trees at the foot of Buffalo Street—I sit under them and go crazy. I love the brie-stuffed french toast and savory scones for breakfast at the Carriage House, and I adore the vintage high chair for my little girl. I love the great programming at the Cornell Cinema and that I can show films related to my classes there, and I love the concert series at Bailey Hall, where I had the pleasure of taking my daughter to hear the legendary Eddie Palmieri. I also love finding intriguing and unexpected pieces of art throughout campus, such as the portraits by contemporary black artist Barkley Hendricks that I stumbled across in Willard Straight Hall’s library.

A New Residence. I have the honor of being faculty in residence at Clara Dickson Hall beginning fall 2009. I am looking forward to serving as a role model and mentor to the incoming freshman and helping to acquaint them with Cornell and adjust to their first experience living away from home. I plan to open my home to them for Sunday morning coffee and bagels and gumbo during the holidays, and to take them apple picking, visiting Niagara Falls, and on other outings in the area.

Community Outreach. I have given talks to groups in the community, and I would like to develop a regular program where I am able to do teaching or mentoring with, for example, the Lou Gossett Jr. Residential Center for Girls.

Hobbies. I swim. I love the pool in Helen Newman Hall on a crisp fall morning. I walk. I embrace the challenge of walking up Buffalo Street or any of the gorges or just strolling the rolling hills of the Cornell Plantations with my daughter. I cook. I often enjoy finding a new vegetable that was previously unknown to me at the Ithaca Farmers’ Market.

History in the Area. There’s a lot of history in and around Ithaca that relates to my field, which is exciting. Harriet Tubman’s home is in Auburn and Frederick Douglass is buried in Rochester. I look forward to the opportunity to visit these places and to learn about them with my students.

The Last Word
Grandeur
Cornell is big, full, excited about ideas, and committed to nurturing scholars. When I say big and full, I am referring to both the grandeur of Cornell’s setting and the significance of what we as a community of scholars, teachers, and students are committed to doing together: learning. It is a huge responsibility to teach and train future art historians, curators, and museum directors. I love teaching. I think of my classroom as a workshop, where new ideas and theories are exchanged and tested. Every day offers up a new story waiting to unfold.

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About Finley

| Years as Cornell faculty | 5 |
| Came to Cornell from | Wellesley College, Massachusetts |
| Favorite spot on campus | Johnson Art Museum; John Henrik Clarke Africana Library |
| Cornell’s research distinction | The magnitude of intellectual ideas and learning |
| Cornell’s trademark | The grandeur of location and commitment to nurturing |
| I am also | A mother and a swimmer |